

The Clipper Visits...Alice Kearney

By MARTHA HIMES

There's more to art than meets the eye. Beyond just being beautiful, art has long been known to have communicative and historical uses. But now it has been discovered to have therapeutic uses as well.

Duxbury resident Alice Kearney, 35, is an art therapist.

In art therapy, patients use an artistic outlet, often drawing or writing, to begin a dis-



cussion with a therapist about their feelings. As the therapy progresses, the art projects can be tailored to help the client heal.

"You use the art as a way to gain insight, to talk about various issues, and then the art can follow along, as well. You can do a project to move on to the next step that the person might be working with," Kearney said.

She described it as an "expressive therapy," along with other therapies such as drama therapy and music therapy.

Beneficial to both children
continued on page 4

Duxbury Clipper

Wednesday, August 20, 2003



and adults, it can be used with all manner of psychological distresses. Some of the conditions Kearney has worked with include developmental delays, family issues, substance abuse and schizophrenia.

The therapeutic techniques differ based on the situation being treated. In trauma cases, the art therapy might focus on helping the client work through feelings resulting from the traumatic event.

Kearney used the artwork produced by children after September 11 as an example. "A lot of times with trauma, people don't have words for it, they have images. You remember seeing a building blow up. You just don't have the words yet."

But for other conditions, the therapist might ask the client to draw the room they are sitting in, in order to help the client focus on the present. Kearney used schizophrenia as an example for that therapeutic technique.

"There's art therapy for a schizophrenic client that's about being contained, and staying on the paper. It's not about 'how did your mom treat you when you were three years old.' It's specifically about trying to focus on reality, reality-based art therapy that's in the present, that's tactile and sensory," she said.

Kearney worked for six years at South Shore Mental Health in Quincy, where she ran group therapy sessions for mentally ill adults. One of the techniques she used in her groups was journaling. Sometimes she would suggest a topic, but patients were free to write about whatever was on their mind as well.

The clients could share their writing and drawing with the group if they wished to, but it was not required. Most of her clients did share their work, Kearney said, and the discussions that followed helped both the artist and the other group members work through their feelings.

"It was helpful in a group because one person might say, 'Oh, that picture scares me,' and being able to talk about that, let's say it might be someone with a violent history, versus another person might say, 'I think that's really beautiful, I love how you did that,'" she said.

At the end of each session, the group members returned their journals to Kearney, elaborately wrapped and tied closed. Some ties would include carefully placed ribbons and beads to ensure the journal could not be opened and identically re-tied, giving the clients the security of

knowing that no one could read what they wrote without their knowledge.

Kearney's interest in art therapy goes back to her undergraduate days at Skidmore College, where she majored in psychology and minored in art. She then officially combined the two interests when she obtained a master's degree in art therapy from Lesley College in Boston. She is a registered art therapist and a licensed mental health counselor, and her treatments are covered by many insurance carriers.

While Kearney, currently focusing on raising her two children, hasn't officially hung out a shingle in Duxbury yet, she does have a small client list and is available for consultations.

For the past few years, she has also been teaching art classes at the Duxbury Art Association. For the most part, her classes more reflect her love of art than her background in art therapy.

In one of Kearney's DAA classes, a parent/child class entitled "I'm a Big Brother/Big Sister Now," some of the therapist's training comes into play. The class is designed to help children expecting a new sibling adjust to the idea of a new addition to the family.

Kearney is careful to caution that it is not a therapy class. "I don't really act as a therapist at the Art Association, just as an art teacher," she said. "It's a catalyst for whatever their own process is for thinking about the new baby coming."

She structures the class to help the children understand that they were once babies themselves, and then to realize how much they have grown. In the last class, each child makes a gift for their new sibling.

As a parent, Kearney has helped a child through the adjustment herself: she and her husband, Rob, have two daughters, Lane, 5, and Maggie, 2. They moved to Duxbury in 1999 from Milton, to be closer to Rob's family and parents, former select-woman Maggie Kearney and her husband William.

This summer, Kearney will be teaching art classes at two weeks of the DAA camp. In the fall she plans to teach "Understanding Art Together," a parent/child class that explores a different art material each week.

She is not planning any art therapy classes for the immediate future, although she has plenty of ideas, including a possible teen journaling class and a parent/child feelings class. She is also excited about an after-school art mentoring program in Lynn for disadvantaged teens about which she recently read, where the teens create art portfolios for submission to colleges and receive help filling out college applications. She'd like to find a way to begin such a program somewhere on the South Shore.

"They help kids make better choices through art," Kearney said. "It can really turn a person's life around at a really pivotal point."